

"THE PRINCESS AND ALL THE KINGDOM"

Excerpted from *The Marriage Feast* by Par Lagerkvist (translated by Allan Blair)

Once upon a time there was a prince, who went out to fight in order to win the princess whose beauty was greater than all others' and whom he loved above everything. He dared his life, he battled his way step by step throughout the country, ravaging it; nothing could stop him. He bled from his wounds but merely cast himself from one fight to the next, the most valiant nobleman to be seen and with a shield as pure as his own young features.

At last, he stood outside the city where the princess lived in her royal castle. It could not hold out against him and had to beg for mercy. The gates were thrown open; he rode in as the conqueror. When the princess saw how proud and handsome he was and thought of how he had dared his life for her sake, she could not withstand his power but gave him her hand. He knelt and covered it with ardent kisses.

"Look, my bride, now I have won you!" he exclaimed, radiant with happiness. "Look, everything I have fought for, now I have won it!" And he commanded that their wedding should take place the same day.

The whole city decked itself out for the festival, and the wedding was celebrated with rejoicing, pomp, and splendor. When in the evening he went to enter the princess's bedchamber, he was met outside by the aged chancellor, a venerable man. Bowing his snow-white head, he tendered the keys of the kingdom and the crown of gold and precious stones to the young conqueror. "Lord, here are the keys of the kingdom which open the treasuries where everything that now belongs to you is kept."

The prince frowned. "What is that you say, old man? I do not want your keys. I have not fought for sordid gain. I have fought merely to win her whom I love, to win that which for me is the only costly thing on earth."

The old man replied, "This, too, you have won, lord. And you cannot set it aside. Now you must administer and look after it."

"Do you not understand what I say? Do you not understand that one can fight, can conquer, without asking any reward other than one's happiness—not fame and gold, not land and power on earth? Well, then, I have conquered but ask for nothing, only to live happily with what, for me, is the only thing of value in life."

"Yes, lord, you have conquered. You have fought your way forward as the bravest of the



brave, you have shrunk from nothing, the land lies ravaged where you have passed by. You have won your happiness. But, lord, others have been robbed of theirs. You have conquered, and, therefore, everything now belongs to you. It is a big land, fertile and impoverished, mighty and laid waste, full of riches and need, full of joy and sorrow, and all is now yours. For he who has won the princess and happiness, to him also belongs this land where she was born; he shall govern and cherish it."

The prince stood there glowering and fingering the hilt of his sword uneasily. "I am the prince of happiness, nothing else!" he burst out. "I don't want to be anything else. If you get in my way, then I have my trusty sword."

But the old man put out his hand soothingly and the young man's arm sank. He looked at him searchingly, with a wise man's calm. "Lord, you are no longer a prince," he said gently. "You are a king." And lifting the crown with his aged hands, he put it on the other's head.

When the young ruler felt it on his brow, he stood silent and moved, more erect than before. And gravely, with his head crowned for power on earth, he went in to his beloved to share her bed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Without looking up the actual definitions, infer the definition of each of the underlined words. Which words were the hardest to define? Explain.
2. How do the emotions of the prince change throughout the story?
3. What lesson does the prince in the story learn?
4. What is a real-life situation that is similar to what happens to the prince?
5. As you grow older, do you think you will struggle with accepting the responsibilities of being an adult? Which ones will be the hardest? Explain.
6. Do you agree with the following quote? "With great power comes great responsibility."